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ABSTRACT

This study investigated young adults' (N=88) perceptions of their parents' sex role characteristics on the basis of maternal employment status. The object of the study was to assess whether an employed mother's nontraditional role affected perceptions of her sex-role characteristics and those of her husband. In addition, the study looked at the relationships among parental sex-role characteristics, family conflict, and negative attitude toward maternal employment. The test packet used in this study consisted of three separate questionnaires, along with a page designed to obtain background information about each subject. The three questionnaires were: the Childhood Appraisal Scale; two subscales of the Minnesota Counseling Inventory (MCI); and the BEM Sex Role Inventory. A relationship was found between maternal masculinity and paternal femininity, which suggests that mothers who are perceived as more instrumental tend to have husbands who are seen by their children as more emotionally expressive and nurturant. Children from two-paycheck families perceived traditional sex-role differences between their parents, seeing mothers as more feminine and fathers as more masculine. Mothers in these families were also perceived as more closely approximating the feminine ideal than fathers were viewed as fulfilling the masculine ideal. Paternal femininity was significantly associated with less problematic family relationships and a reduced tendency to blame negative outcomes on maternal employment. The association between both maternal femininity and masculinity, and more positive family relationships and less blaming of maternal employment suggests that both sets of maternal qualities facilitate two-paycheck family functioning. (LLL)

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Effects of Maternal Employment on Perceived Parental Sex-Role Characteristics

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Introduction

Much research has considered the impact of maternal employment on children's intellectual development, mother's psychological and physical well-being and father's level of functioning. Some of the latter work has suggested that negative responses in husbands are associated with greater traditionalism and are linked to perceived threats to masculinity. To date, however, there has been little empirical investigation of the impact of a wife's working on the perceived masculinity of fathers.

In addition, studies have explored marital and family conflict consequences attributable to marital employment. Several investigators have suggested a need for parents in two-paycheck families to abandon traditional divisions of household responsibilities. This is urged in order to avoid imposing a double burden on employed mothers which otherwise often engenders resentment and marital conflicts (Hochschild, 1989; Chambliss and Hartl, 1990).

Some of the resistance encountered to these attempts to redistribute household responsibilities with greater equity has been attributed to concerns about violating sex-role stereotypes. Fathers voice fears of appearing less masculine and more feminine and wonder about the social acceptability of assuming responsibility for tasks traditionally performed by mothers. Some fathers wonder about the effects of their performance of traditionally "maternal" activities on their ability to provide an optimal role model of masculinity to their offspring. In a parallel fashion, some employed women express concern that their involvement in traditionally masculine careers might affect their perceived femininity.

In this investigation, young adults' perceptions of their parents sex-role characteristics were analyzed on the basis of maternal employment status. The object of the study was to assess whether an employed mother's "nontraditional" role seems to affect perceptions of her sex-role characteristics and those of her husband.

Perceptions of parental sex-role characteristics might be expected to vary as a function of maternal work status. The employment of women, and their career involvement (perhaps as a result of their type of work) has an effect on their sex-role identities. Previous work has shown that women who are typed as more feminine are seen as less career involved, and those who are typed as masculine are found to be significantly more career involved than feminine typed women (Gaddy, Glass, and Arnkoff, 1983). Perhaps these findings have implications for how employed and non-employed mothers will be viewed by their children with respect to traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics.

The need for greater parental involvement in household and child care activities in a home where the mother is employed might influence perceptions of the father's masculinity and femininity. To date, no studies have been performed investigating perceived masculinity and femininity in the parents of children with employed versus non-employed mothers. One study, however, by Gardner and LeBrecque (1986) gave and indication of how parental sex roles are

perceived by children in the dual career family. Adolescents endorsed the belief that when both parents are employed, both mother and father should share in the household chores. Also, adolescents believed that when the mother is not employed, the household duties should be primarily the responsibility of the woman. Maternal employment and the resulting household task sharing of the father could perhaps result in children perceiving employed mothers as more traditionally masculine than their non-employed counterparts, and fathers with employed wives as more traditionally feminine than their peers with nonemployed wives. The current investigation will evaluate whether the "nontraditional" parental roles in the two-paycheck families erase perceived sex-role characteristic differences between parents.

In addition, the relationships among parental sex-role characteristics, family conflict, and negative attitude toward maternal employment will be assessed. This will permit evaluation of whether perceptions of parents are associated with perceptions of overall family functioning and whether blaming of maternal employment status for various negative childhood outcomes is more commonly encountered in families where parents are portrayed as more traditional (with respect to sex-roles).

The latter notion is consistent with previous work showing greater negativity toward maternal employment in more traditional husbands. It seems feasible that these husbands would communicate their critical attitude toward their wife's employment to their children who might be expected to adopt similar negative views, and as a result be more likely to attribute negative childhood outcomes to their mother's employment status. Observation of such phenomena could be of value to parents interested in optimizing family functioning. For example, since such maternal blaming by children could potentially compromise the future mother-child relationship, if such "contagion" occurs, fathers might wish to reevaluate the manner in which they broadcast their attitude within the family.

Method

Subjects:

The subjects in this study were 88 college students. The sample consisted of 34 men and 54 women who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania. The subjects ranged in age from 18-28 years of age.

Procedure:

The test packet used in this study consisted of three separate questionnaires, along with a page designed to obtain background information about each subject. The subjects were first asked their sex and age. Subjects then gave information about their mother's work status at each period of development. The stages of development and ages of each stage of development were as follows: infancy (birth to 1 1/2 years), preschool (age 2-5), childhood (age 6-12), and adolescence (age 13-15). The subjects were to report whether their mothers worked part-time, full-time or not at all at each stage of development.

Subjects also disclosed information about their mother's job, indicating whether it was professional, white collar, or blue collar work. The last question on background information required the subjects to answer whether or not they had been raised in a single parent household throughout their lives. Six subjects from single-parent households were excluded from the sample.

The first questionnaire in the packet was the Childhood Appraisal Scale (CAS), which consisted of 18 items. This questionnaire was created by the experimenters, and aimed to measure the subject's perception of the consequences of their mother's work status. The subjects were asked to circle a number from 1 to 4 depending on how strongly each subject agreed or disagreed with each statement. The statements were presented so that subjects indicated how they felt their lives would be different if their mother's work status had been different when they were growing up. This permitted an assessment of the perceived impact of fulltime and parttime maternal employment as well as nonemployment.

The second part of the packet consisted of two subscales of the Minnesota Counseling Inventory (MCI). The Family Relationship (FR) and Social Relationship (SR) subscales of the MCI consists of 97 items that were extracted from the original 355 item inventory.

The two subscales of the MCI required the subjects to answer "true" or "false" to questions that revealed adjustment or non-adjustment in family and social relationships. High scores on either of the scales are indicative of maladjustments, while low scores are indicative of adjustment by the subject in family and social relationships.

The last section of the packet was the BEM Sex Role Inventory. Traditionally the BEM Sex Role Inventory is used to assess an individual's own perception of their masculinity and femininity. In this study, however, the BEM Sex Role Inventory was used in an unconventional manner. Subjects were asked to rate both their

mother and father in terms of perceived masculinity and femininity using the short form of the inventory, which consists of 30 rather than 60 items. Ratings of each parent were made using a seven point scale, which allowed the subject to assign a value to each of the traditionally masculine, feminine, and neutral items in the list. Low scores on the BEM Sex Role Inventory indicated that the subject perceived the parent as showing traditional masculine or feminine characteristics to a lesser degree. High scores, on the other hand, indicated that the subject perceived the parent as showing the traditional characteristics to a greater degree.

Results

Parental Sex Role Characteristics

Perceived masculinity and femininity scores were calculated for each subject's mother and father by adding the values assigned to the relevant characteristics. Masculinity and femininity scores correlated significantly for fathers ($r = .30$, $p.<.01$). A father rated high on the set of traditional "masculine" characteristics, was also typically rated high on the traditional "feminine" set of qualities.

For the entire sample ($n = 61$), maternal masculinity was significantly related to paternal femininity ($r = .32$, $p.<.01$). Maternal masculinity and paternal masculinity were unrelated. In addition, paternal masculinity was unrelated to either maternal characteristic.

Findings from t-test comparisons showed that in these two-paycheck families mothers were seen as significantly more feminine than masculine ($p. < .0001$; femininity $\bar{X} = 58.13$, s.d. = 11.21; masculinity $\bar{X} = 48.63$, s.d. = 10.76. Fathers were seen as significantly more masculine than feminine ($p. < .001$, masculinity $\bar{X} = 54.38$, s.d. = 10.69; femininity $\bar{X} = 47.24$, s.d. = 15.05). Cross-sex parental t-test comparisons revealed that mothers were perceived to be significantly more feminine than fathers ($p. < .0001$) and fathers were seen as significantly more masculine than mothers ($p. < .005$).

When parents' fulfillment of traditional sex-role expectations was operationalized in terms of their score on the relevant gender scale, mothers were found to show significantly higher actualization of these expectations ($p. < .05$). When parents' fulfillment of non-traditional sex-role expectations was operationalized in terms of their score on the opposite gender scale, there was no significant difference between mothers and fathers.

Parental Sex Role Characteristics and Childhood Appraisal

For the total sample, paternal masculinity was not related to scores on any of the Childhood Appraisal Scale (CAS) items, measuring tendency to blame maternal work status for negative outcomes. In contrast, paternal femininity was negatively correlated with ten of the eighteen CAS items. Maternal femininity and maternal masculinity were each significantly negatively correlated with a few of the Childhood Appraisal Scale items.

Subjects who saw their fathers as high in traditional "feminine" qualities were less likely to blame maternal work status for having adversely influenced the general quality of their childhood ($r = -.33$, $p.<.01$) their current happiness ($r = -.33$, $p.<.01$), success ($r = -.43$, $p.<.001$), self-esteem ($r = -.45$, $p.<.001$), ease ($r = -.41$, $p.<.001$, relationship with their father ($r = -.36$, $p.<.01$), family harmony ($r = -.37$, $p.<.01$), parents' marriage ($r = .35$, $p.<.01$), maternal happiness ($r = .33$, $p.<.01$), and the family's financial situation ($r = .39$, $p.<.01$).

Maternal femininity was negatively associated with attributing problems with their relationship with their mother ($r = -.33$, $p.<.01$), and to maternal work status. Maternal femininity was inversely related to the perception that maternal work status had adversely affected the subject's admiration for their mother.

Subjects who saw their mothers as highly "masculine" were less likely to believe that maternal work status had negatively affected their social ease ($r = -.30$, $p.<.01$), relationship with their father ($r = -.44$, $p.<.001$), and their parents' marriage quality ($r = -.32$, $p.<.01$).

Parental Sex role Characteristics and Family and Social Relationships

Findings on the FR Scale were consistent with the preceeding results showing a negative relationship between tendency to blame negative childhood outcomes on maternal work status and perceived paternal femininity and maternal femininity. Here, these same parental sex role characteristics were negatively associated with perceived family relationships problems (paternal femininity $r = -.54$, $p.<.001$ and maternal femininity $r = -.53$, $p.<.001$). Neither maternal nor paternal masculinity were significantly associated with scores on the FR scale. Scores on the SR scale were not significantly related to parental sex role characteristic.

Discussion

The modest but significant association between masculinity and femininity scores for fathers may be attributable to children's overall positive or negative attitudes toward their father, because both sets of characteristics are generally viewed as socially desirable. This finding challenges the conventional assumption of an inverse relationship between perception of masculinity and femininity, and supports the notion that children recognize the possibility of paternal androgyny. It even suggests that a father's involvement in activities that increase his perceived femininity might increase his perceived masculinity as well.

The small but reliable relationship between maternal masculinity and paternal femininity suggests that mothers who are perceived as more instrumental tend to have husbands who are seen by their children as more emotionally expressive and nurturant. This might be due to a greater willingness on the part of mothers seen as highly masculine to share tasks traditionally seen as feminine with husbands, perhaps because they are less proprietary of the "nurturer" role than less masculine mothers. According to this line of reasoning, less masculine mothers derive so much of their esteem from traditional feminine pursuits that they effectively exclude fathers from the nurturant role. On the other hand, it might be that fathers married to highly masculine women are seen as more feminine because they have compensated for a failure to nurture on the part of their wives. However, this possibility is unlikely, given the absence of a negative relationship between maternal masculinity and maternal femininity. Apparently, more masculine mothers are no less likely to be seen as feminine than less masculine mothers.

The results also indicate that children from two-paycheck families perceive traditional sex-role characteristics differences between their parents. Mothers are seen as more feminine, fathers as more masculine. Comparisons also suggested that the mothers in these families were perceived as more closely approximating the feminine ideal than the fathers were viewed as fulfilling the masculine ideal. Both parents were seen as equivalently exhibiting characteristics traditionally associated with the opposite sex in these families.

Paternal femininity was significantly associated with less problematic family relationships and a reduced tendency to blame negative outcomes maternal employment. This "protective" effect of fathers seen as nurturant and sensitive may stem from their skills in maintaining smooth family functioning, despite the special stresses associated with the two-paycheck family lifestyle. It is also possible that less feminine fathers were more critical of their wives' working, and therefore, consciously or unconsciously, enhanced such negative attributions in their children. This might occur in the two-paycheck families where fathers feel especially ill-equipped in terms of personality to perform the nontraditional nurturant tasks they might encounter.

The association between both maternal femininity and masculinity, and more positive family relationships and less blaming of maternal employment suggests that both sets of maternal

qualities facilitate two-paycheck family functioning. Another possibility is that two-paycheck families that function more optimally have a greater influence on children's positive perception of mothers than of fathers This is consistent with the idea that mothers are held more responsible for overall family functioning than are fathers. Future research may wish to evaluate the relative merits of the different ways of conceptualizing this correlational data.

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